The Apprenticeship Model - Experiential learning or experience of learning

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© Roland Fletcher
Senior Lecturer in Law

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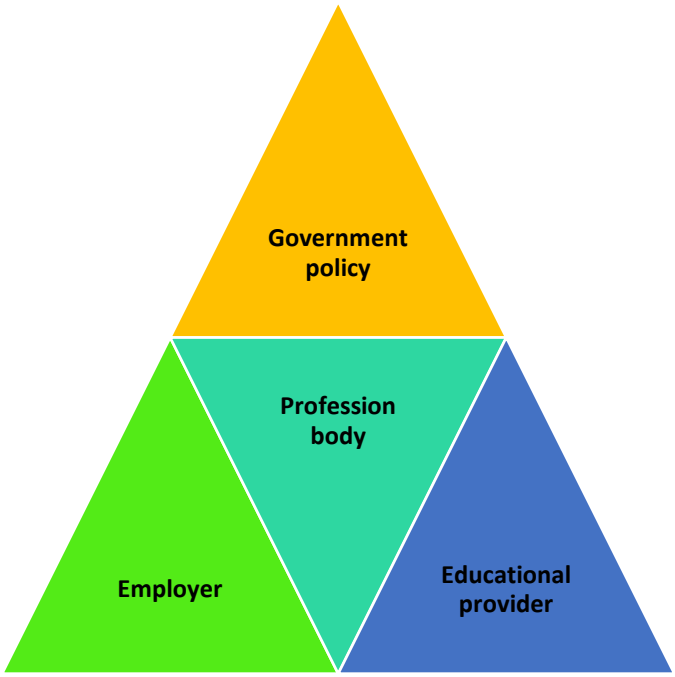
Introduction

The learning environment within higher educational institutions is constantly evolving and this is being driven by government policy which is has a direct effect on the way educational provision is being created and delivered in higher educational institutions. Educational provision is packaged and delivered to meet the funding mechanisms and re-structuring of governance frameworks which now reflect market principles. Such economic policies are having a direct impact on the way universities generate income and this has triggered new forms of educational provision; such as work-based learning which takes place outside the educational institution. Work-based learning is one example that gives recognition of learning from experience and many educational institutions have captured this form of experiential or experience of learning through a reflective account or by creating a symbiotic assessment which reflects the working environment. The recognition of experiential learning, which incorporates competency-based learning and the acquisition of skills, within undergraduate studies is evolving through government policy. One such policy is the degree apprenticeship model which has produced a collaborative relationship which consists of employers and professional bodies who identify the knowledge and skills required to practise a particular profession. The fusion of learning whilst earning is not a new concept and the pressure is now on higher educational institutions to formulate and deliver experiential learning through the apprenticeship degree model. This is not an easy task as the educational provider is only delivering part of the package. The employer will have to create a learning environment which will have to answer the question: what has been learnt from a specific experience? To answer this question there is usually a set criterial which has been identified and must be evidences either in the form of a written test or from completing a practical assessment. Demonstrating learning taking place from experience is not as straightforward as it may sound as Jordan et al (2008: 199) explains: "… 'experiential learning' is not the same as 'experience of learning'. The former relates to experience and the latter to learning."

Designing a Curriculum

Designing a curriculum to accommodate the experiential learning needs careful planning in order to support work-based learning and supplement the knowledge and skills that will underpin the professional qualification. Therefore, the educational provision may be designed to be delivered in the classroom, in the work-place, at home or through a virtual environment. In order to ensure learning is taking place the educationalist must be able to adapt theoretical concepts which underpin educational practise. It is the foundation of learning that a specific educational approach, or a combination of theoretical approaches to learning have been adopted or adapted in order for learning to take place. This is the raison d'être for an educationalist when designing educational provision. The student is the centre of the construct and the educationalist must build a framework which will enable the student to manoeuvre

through the course of study and ultimately achieve the desired aim(s). It is within these different educational dimensions of learning and teaching, such as behaviourism, cognitivism, constructivism, social learning and cultural learning to name but a few approaches that may be adopted. This provides a platform to create an appropriate framework within which you may then incorporate the educational provision that will 'fit' with the demands being placed on the higher educational institution. In this instance the UK government is promoting the apprenticeship degree and has formulated a framework called the 'Trailblazer'. It has been designed to give employers the opportunity to identify the required skills and underpinning knowledge required for a specific profession, such as engineering, science and law. The Trailblazer is a product which has been produced through a collaborative relationship which consists of a number of parties who sit in a hierarchical frame which is illustrated in the diagram, below.



The diagram places the government at the top of this relationship: the policy aims to produce a skilled workforce. The Trailblazer is linked directly with the development of skills whilst reading for a degree. Whereas, the notion of reading for a degree and the relationship with employability is well founded there are growing concerns that the skills needed by many business are not being met by university graduates. Spielhofer and Sims (2004: 112) found that many UK businesses lacked the relevant skills needed to compete in a global market. Their criticism were levelled at the transmission of knowledge and the development of academic skills which are not always compatible with the vocational skills needed in the employment market. Although higher educational courses integrate a package of skills, which are transferable into the working environment, there is continuing criticism that the labour market in the UK is

falling short of the required skills needed to compete in a global economy (BIS 2015). The UK government Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS is now part of a merged dept, Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy) is addressing this criticism through the introduction of their 'Apprenticeship Trailblazer'. The policy behind this apprenticeship model is that it will allow students in further and higher education to acquire the appropriate skills to compete in a global market through the apprenticeship model. The thrust of their argument is that the use of vocational education and training through the apprenticeship model may be the cure for the shortage of skills and may very well lead to a stronger and competitive economy. This sounds like a sensible approach, however, previous apprenticeship models have not always attracted the number of apprentices to meet the skills needed in the labour market. This was evident from the research undertaken by Mazenod (2015) who found that 16-18 year olds were not taking up the apprenticeship places:

> *… in the academic year 2009/2016, 16-18-year olds still made up 42% of all apprenticeship starts in England … Since then the proportion of this age group has continued to decrease. The failure of successive governments to raise the number of young people engaging in learning through apprenticeships has been explained by poor apprenticeship policy design and implementation (at page 103).*

Therefore, the development of skills for a global labour market continues to be a contentious issue as the skills needed, in different industries, is evolving at a pace which does not always match the necessary changes and demands taking place within higher educational institutions. This is one of the reasons why government(s) world-wide are changing the way higher educational institutions are funded and forcing them to change their governance framework which will reflect a commercial enterprise (Naidoo 2005).

The Magic Bullet

The current government believe the magic bullet to fill these skills gaps is the 'Apprenticeship Trailblazer'. This model is linked directly to the Richard Review (2012) which was undertaken to answer the questions: "What should an apprenticeship be in the future, and how can apprenticeships meet the needs of a changing economy?" (2012: 2). In answering these questions the Richard Review (2012: 4) evaluated the evolution of the apprenticeship model in the UK and found the original model had been diluted through too much government intervention which diminished the relationship between the employer and apprentice. Richards also believed the old system had turned into a box ticking exercise and lost the true meaning of what is an apprenticeship. This led to the following proposal outlined in his paper in 2012:

> *… the new apprenticeship qualifications at the heart of my recommendations focus solely on setting out, in terms relevant and meaningful for employers, what an apprentice should be able to do and know at the end of their apprenticeship. … to teach new knowledge and skills, and demonstrate to future employers that an apprentice can do their job. These new apprenticeship qualifications should replace today's apprenticeship frameworks. They should be set by those who know best: employers. … The solution lies in shifting the power over designing and developing apprenticeship qualifications to employers in a far more direct and transparent way than at present, whilst giving Government a clearer role in defining what a good quality standard looks like. (Pp.6-7)*

Richard is clear that the design and development of the apprenticeship model should be left to the employer whilst leaving governance of quality assurance to the government. This is a clear distribution of responsibility between design and monitoring standards. This has resulted in the Trailblazer apprenticeship degree being constructed by the employer in consultation with its professional (governing) body. The Trailblazer has made it clear that it is the employer who identifies what the apprentice should learn and the specific skills needed to be developed in order to produce a competent professional (2012: 7). This approach separates the role between the employer and any government agency set up to monitor the apprenticeship. It appears that the identifying of the educational provider is also with the employer. The government have accepted these proposal and placed the employer in the driving seat when it comes to formulating the educational provision and key skills needed within a specific profession. This is outlined in the Assessment Plan which accompanies every Trailblazer apprenticeship and will act as the blue print for the educational provision to be provided.

Adopting government policy and transforming that policy into an educational framework will have a direct impact on the type of educational provision and, in particular, the mode or mechanism(s) for delivering education provision. There are a number of pull-factors for apprentices and employers. For example, apprentices undertaking the Trailblazer apprenticeship degree will not be responsible for their course fees. The employer will be responsible for paying one-third of the fee and the remaining two-thirds are paid by the government. Taxes are being raised by introducing a levy on employers through a business tax. This tax will be paid by employers whose gross salary bill is above £3 million. The government will set a rate of 0.5% on the portion of the salary bill worth more than this figure. Also, apprentices will be paid a wage whilst they are working and studying and since April 2016 employers no longer have to pay secondary Class 1 (employer) national insurance contributions for apprentices under the age of 25 who are earning up to the Upper Earning Limit. When you compare this with undergraduate students who are

responsible for their fees, which may be in the region of £9,000 each academic year this does make the apprenticeship degree attractive.

There does appear to be a number of key factors which are making the apprenticeship degree attractive but this an enmeshed relationship between government policy, governing body, employer and educational provider. This is placing even further demands upon educationalists to develop and package educational provision upon demand. This demand to yield to market forces has chipped away at the academic integrity and created a business models that now shape the way educational provision is produced and packaged for the consumer, or should I say student? I pose this question as one of the consequences of grafting a commercial business model on to a traditional higher educational institution is to create a number of tensions between the different set of values that the pedagogic relationship has between tutor and student which is then tantamount to service provider and customer. This warning is not a disclaimer but merely a sign-post that needs to be noticed. The design of educational provision needs careful consideration. It is not just about the subject matter but how learning will take place and the skills that will be developed whilst the student interacts with the educational framework. There are a number of theoretical models that may be drawn upon when developing approaches to learning and how knowledge, skills and competencies may be assessed. There needs to be a 'real' connection between the way educational provision has been designed and delivered in order to get it right. When employers are drafting the assessment plan and identifying the educational provider there is the potential for a conflict of power between what standards are being required and how these standards will be maintained. This problem is being created by the way the Trailblazer apprenticeship model has been structured. The language being used by government and how this has filtered down to the educationalist's role is typical of the demands being placed upon higher educational institutions. For example, the use of 'official knowledge' that Bernstein (2000:65) refers to as: "… educational knowledge which the state constructs and distributes in educational institutions," needs to be viewed in light of today's political and economic climate. Therefore, it is through this type of knowledge that, arguably, governmental reforms are being implemented through the reconstruction of the curriculum to accommodate and develop government policy. It is government who are the educational architect(s) of reform: the government (policies) and delivered (constructed) through the curriculum which provide the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy.

Recontextualisation of Language and Government Policy

You can't ignore the wider implications of how government policy continues to use language and introduce new policies, such as the apprenticeship degree. For example, it is the transference of this knowledge that inspired Bernstein (2000:25) and he discusses the transformation of this knowledge through a pedagogic

communication model. He uses the educational system (structures) within a society and links varies interrelationships within that system to demonstrate how policy, language and the recontextualisation of that language are reproduced within the classroom. Bernstein (2000: 65) believes the State (government) constructs and then distributes through the curriculum 'official knowledge' which is then filtered down to students through their tutors, who act as agents of the State. Therefore, 'pedagogic communication' is the transmitter for external powers, for example, the state via internal powers who act as agents and eventually the internal organs within an educational institution, the tutors, who are recontextualising language when they deliver that knowledge. Bernstein (2000:26) believed that it was imperative to be aware of this constitution and the relays within such a structure, in order to visualize the relay and the relayed of policy and information. He supported his model by distinguishing between language as a device and the interrelationship between the pedagogic devices. For example, the connection between governmental policies and the delivery through the pedagogic device becomes tangible. Therefore, according to Bernstein (2000:6) the government (State) is an example of power and control through formulating policy documents that inevitably shape the curriculum within an educational institution. He perceived this as a dominant power relationship between certain categories, which eventually emanate to the level of the individual. This was evident, according to Bernstein (2000), through framing, i.e., the controls on communication between the tutor and the student and this regulated not only the relationship but also the form of communication that legitimately takes place. Thus, framing may be described as the construct that is built around an internal logic of pedagogic practices.

Curriculum development and pedagogy

To develop Bernstein's theory of power and control through the curriculum it is necessary to examine his concept(s) through the work of Barnett and Coates (2005). Barnett and Coates (2005:5-6) discuss curriculum development and pedagogy. They demonstrate how the curriculum and pedagogy come together:

> *…a curriculum is a set of educational experiences organized more or less deliberately and that pedagogy is concerned with the acts of teaching that bring off that curriculum. Here, pedagogy becomes a handmaiden to curriculum: curriculum sets out the aims and pedagogy looks to realize those aims in the most efficacious way*

It is within this definition that we are able to see the link between the student experience and the delivery of that experience. The approaches to teaching and

learning within higher education may vary but the notion of reading for a degree and developing self-directed learning are universal factors. Supporting students and developing their confidence and skills to become self-directed is a task in itself. It is not an easy transition for many students in higher education to take control over their learning (Petty 1998:387). To ensure that students are prepared for independent learning they must be given the opportunity to develop the appropriate skills. For example, by designing a programme that allows the tutor to monitor and assess the students through a series of formative assignments is, arguably, conducive to the learning process within higher education. This approach is best suited through directed reading and appropriate teaching methods, for example, lectures (didactic) and workshops (student centred). This whole process needs to be underpinned by the curriculum that supports the structure of such programmes and the needs of the student. However, the delivery of programmes within higher educational institutions are constantly being challenged through on-going government policies and the proliferation of new proposals currently being debated, for example, student expansion through a knowledge based economy and now we have the apprenticeship degree to accommodate. In this instance it would seem that many governmental policy is not considering the delivery of higher education but only the end product. The implementation of government policy through higher educational awards needs careful consideration and most importantly the needs of the students should be paramount. Education should be sequential, building upon each stage, and the work of Vygotsky (1986) dealing with the 'Zone of Proximal Development' (ZPD) and that students should be nurtured through various stages and assessing and measuring development should be an on-going process, not an end product. This approach does not appear to be of primal importance to the current government and arguably, learning, teaching and cognition are being ignored. Instead, it would seem that productivity is being placed above the pedagogic process. It is inevitable that the development of the economy is linked to education but the evolution of education should be linked to adequate resources to deliver these programmes. For example, Hahn and John-Steiner (2002:53) discuss the relationship between tutors and students and suggest that:

> *Teachers [should be] … able to collaborate with students in creating environments conducive to transformative teaching/learning if they attempt to understand their lived experiences, knowledge and feelings. Doing so will reveal the complexities of students' cognitive and emotional development.*

This will only be possible if the structure and resources are fully considered when developing a new award (programme) to meet the demands of government policies. Vygotsky (1978:90) believed that:

> *Learning is not development; however, properly organized learning results in a mental development and sets in motion a variety of developmental processes that would be impossible apart from learning.*

Vygotsky focussed on the process and the linkage between teaching, learning and the development of the mind (Wells & Claxton 2002:84) and the way that students organize and process information in a learning environment. He was of the opinion that learning should lead to a changing experience through the development of the mind. Vygotsky believed that the process of teaching, learning and cognitive development should not be considered separately but should be conceptually brought together when developing the curriculum. Current government policy, and the shaping of educational provision, is focussing on the development of the apprenticeship model.

Conclusion

The task of supporting students in higher education and for students to become self-directed in their studies is no longer a realistic goal. The government's educational policies to widen access and provide lifelong learning may be perceived as providing social justice and opportunity. However, in substance teaching, learning and the development of the mind have become secondary to political goals. The construct built around pedagogic practise has been eroded through the government's fixation on student expansion, fuelled by funding mechanisms. This has produced a tension between the autonomy of those who deliver education and those who wish to implement policy. The student experience should be the driving force behind curriculum development and not corporate interests. The expansion of student numbers in higher education and the use of experiential learning through work-based learning is a positive approach but the transition for the student needs to be considered first and foremost when developing and implementing government policies. Vygotsky recognised the sequence of events that should take place in order for the mind to develop. This will only be achieved when the educational provider is given a stronger position in the collaborative relationship created by the current government.

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